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"It's Your Ship"
D. Michael Abrashoff
Warner Books, Inc. (2002)

The Pacific Leadership Academy provided a significant number of books recommended for this book report. After considering the list and mobile library, one book in particular caught my eye. I wanted to find a book that related to my job and my organization.

I believe most government employees understand that their "business" is not run like most. Such a large organization with an enormous scope is difficult to operate with the fiscal responsibility, efficiency, and watchfulness as a corporation that depends on the bottom line. For this reason, I searched for a book that I could relate to, and more importantly, a book that could relate to me.

A Navy Captain wrote "It's Your Ship", the book I chose. He told of his experiences as the Commanding Officer of the USS BENFOLD, a cutting edge, state of the art warfighting destroyer. Being from the aviation community, it is difficult to accurately relate to the life a surface warfare officer. Much animosity is shared and gentle mockeries are often made between the communities. Nonetheless, I decided that I could learn something from Captain Abrashoff. Although I enjoy history books and stories of war heroes, I wanted to explore the mind of an officer that had served in the modern era and knew some of the challenges facing the Navy today.

Captain Abrashoff organized his book in a clear and concise manner. He broke down the chapters by specific tasks that he wanted to portray. To explain those tasks, he told of his experiences, problems, and challenges. He used "sea stories", as we call them in the Navy, to explain what he did and how it could be used on a larger scale. He often tried to tie normal business practices into the stories. Obviously, it was not necessary for me. It was apparent that the Captain was looking for a larger audience than the military. Although I understood most of the ideals he spoke of, I am not sure a person outside of the military would completely understand the stories and hierarchy involved in the decisions that he made. I do think his points were taken well enough that they could be applied to any organization.

The overwhelming theme Captain Abrashoff focused on was his people. People are the heartbeat and driving force of any organization. If they respect you, if they trust you, if they understand your decision making logic, things can happen that were never imagined. He focuses on the people and how they are treated. He took the opportunity to meet every one of the Sailors assigned to his ship. He met their families when they were in town. He sent birthday cards to his Sailors spouses.

Not a single chapter left out his people. He started by explaining how to lead by example. Captain Abrashoff learned that his Sailors followed his lead. Therefore it was his responsibility to provide the best example possible. He then explained about listening to Sailors. He recognized that we, being government employees, often operate with archaic rules that made sense when they were placed into service. Captain Abrashoff recognized that some of these rules and procedures were not logical with modern technologies employed. He challenged his crew to develop more efficient ways to accomplish the same tasks. Often the new methods saved the time of the crew,

the Navy money, and raised the battle readiness of the ship. Many parties benefited from the ingenuity of his Sailors. Often the ideas were shared with other ships and people higher in the chain of command.

One of the ideas that I liked from the book was to nurture the freedom to fail. Captain Abrashoff recognized that not every idea was successful. Some ideas seemed good at the time, but during the analysis of the results, did not necessarily prove positive. He was careful not to punish a Sailor for their attempt to improve a product. It would inhibit the creativity of the entire crew should this empowerment be removed.

Another concept that I appreciated was to communicate purpose and meaning. Captain Abrashoff was compelled to provide a direction and vision to his crew. He set bold, yet achievable, goals and made sure these goals were well known. If a change was made, he communicated the variance and reason to the ship. Although the military is often an organization of barking orders and expecting them to be followed, that should not always be the case. You must build the trust and confidence of the crew in the day-to-day operations in order to have them blindly follow orders under the premise of "Because I said so". No one likes their mother saying that, why would you like a boss to do the same thing?

"It's Your Ship" made me consider the most important part of any organization. It is such a simple concept, but one that is overlooked virtually everywhere. The attention to the Sailor, or any person that works for or with you, will get you and your organization further. The ownership one takes in their job and the pride exuded in their company is the easiest and cheapest way to increase productivity. I gained a new perspective on leadership and people skills that eluded me for a long time. I have always heard people say that their people should be the first priority. It is easy to say, yet much more difficult to do. The challenge is finding the way to build the trust and the time to get to know your people. This, in turn, will create an atmosphere of a team with a common cause and mission, rather than individuals that come to work to collect a paycheck. Captain Abrashoff laid the foundation for me to start creating methods for gaining trust and respect. I too may have my own command one day.